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SYMPATHY, EMPATHY AND POSTMEMORY:
PROBLEMATIC POSITIONS IN *UNSERE MÜTTER*, *UNSERE VÄTER*

As time passes, memory culture must strive to find new ways to make present the events and consequences of the Third Reich. Attempts to engage new generations emotionally with this past are fraught with intellectual and ethical pitfalls, however. These risks were contested in the international debates prompted by the mini-series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, directed by Philipp Kadelbach, which originally aired on the German broadcaster ZDF in three parts in March 2013. Portraying the final years of the Second World War from a German perspective, this historical melodrama explores the political, criminal, and moral guilt of a group of Germans born around 1920. In the tradition of Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Band of Brothers* (2001), extravagant battle scenes are designed to also convey the abject horror of military combat. Such a layered depiction of World War II is a hallmark of twenty-first-century engagements with the Nazi past in Germany, which seek to understand the Third Reich in its totality, posing unavoidable questions about historical responsibility in the wider context of the individual's everyday experience. *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* emerged at a time when the monolithic categories of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' were being complicated in a manner that has enabled a more complex emotional as well as ethical response to the past. Indeed, the dominant tone of recent examinations of the past is now empathy and reflection rather than outright condemnation.¹

¹ Stuart Taberner, 'Memory Work in Recent German Novels: What (if Any) Limits Remain on Empathy with the "German Experience" of the Second World War?', in *Germans as Victims in the Literary Fiction of the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Karina Berger and Stuart Taberner (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), pp. 205-18.

The very title of the drama, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, contains clues as to the trademarks of this new tenor of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Its striking gender sequencing (the rare emphasis on women's experience) and familial references highlight the familial and feminine tropes that, as Marianne Hirsch contends, allow individuals to establish affective links to a traumatic past that they did not personally experience: 'They rebuild and re-embody a connection that is disappearing.'² With the term 'postmemory', Hirsch attempts to account for the fact that the emotional intensity of the Holocaust has not been diminished for subsequent generations even as their knowledge about it becomes increasingly mediated. Hirsch therefore emphasizes the imaginative processes required for belated generations to reconstruct the past from fragmentary stories, images, and objects, and to establish its personal meaning. The subjective focus seen to define postmemory carries with it the risk of distortion and positive revision, however, as the past to be remembered becomes weighed down by the psychological needs of the remembering individual.³

In what follows, I will explore the manipulation of gendered and generational tropes in the historical melodrama *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* in order to illuminate the complex link between gender and genre in the generation of postmemory. Analyzing the debates surrounding the drama's depiction of the Third Reich and the Second World War will also allow me to engage with the perils of postmemorial engagements with history, which may overly personalize the past being told, on the one hand, and gloss over or revise its most

² Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 48.

³ See for example Anne Fuchs's critique of Hirsch's theory in Chapter 3 of *Phantoms of War in Contemporary German Literature, Films, and Discourse: The Politics of Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

difficult dimensions, on the other. These ethical pitfalls are particularly visible in the German context, which presents a compelling test case for Hirsch's theory of affiliative postmemory, which was developed primarily with reference to the victims of the Holocaust.⁴ Numerous critics of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* considered the sympathetic portrayal of the 'Nazi' characters to be highly problematic. The drama bypasses the established rules for engaging with National Socialism which deem only its *victims* to be worthy of empathy.⁵ The mini-series was seen to orchestrate the emotions of the viewer for apologetic ends, eliciting empathy for their suffering rather than confronting their moral responsibility. As Petra Rau writes, such reservations about the likeability of compromised protagonists are telling. It is precisely 'the ordinariness of the perpetrators that discomfits critics who prefer a clear verdict on individual behaviour under totalitarianism'.⁶ To judge by the controversy it caused, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* touched on a sore point of not merely of German memory culture but moral culture more broadly. The drama asks us to judge the moral failings of the German population not from a safe position of distance, if not superiority, but instead from one of sympathy and likeness. In the final part of this article, I contend that sympathy with the supporters of National Socialism does not automatically inhibit critique or moral

⁴ See also J.J. Long, 'Monika Maron's Pawels Briefe: Photography, Narrative, and the Claims of Postmemory', in *German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse Since 1990*, ed. by Anne Fuchs, Mary Cosgrove, and Georg Grote (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 147–65.

⁵ See Helmut Schmitz, *On Their Own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* (University of Birmingham Press, 2004), pp. 98-101.

⁶ Petra Rau, *Our Nazis: Representations of Fascism in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 11.

reflection. Rather, I argue that some affective or experiential common ground must be identified if the circumstances that led to the Holocaust are to resonate with the ethical reality of post-war generations.

Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter as a Postmemorial Film

According to the promotional material published by ZDF, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* was conceived to unite multiple generations in dialogue about the Nazi past: ‘Nicht mehr lange bietet sich die Chance, dass die Kriegsteilnehmer mit ihren Kindern, Enkeln und Urenkeln in einen Dialog treten können. Der Dreiteiler *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* soll Anlass sein, zu fragen und zu hinterfragen, den Dialog zu intensivieren.’⁷ Alongside the programme itself, the broadcaster launched a website (www.gedaechtnis-der-nation.de) where viewers could archive their family memories or upload photographs and other testimonial objects. National newspapers including the broadsheet *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the tabloid *Bild* also invited readers to share their stories. The familial reference in the drama’s title, expressed in the possessive, signals a desire to close the epistemological and emotional gap between the viewing audience and those who lived through the Third Reich.

The generational markers in the programme’s title are somewhat misleading, however. Born around 1921, the focal protagonists are not the parents but the grandparents or even great-grandparents of many audience members in the key advertising demographic of fourteen to forty-nine year olds. Conceding this peculiarity, producer Nico Hofmann (b. 1959) admits that the chosen title reflects his personal investment in the stories he tells,

⁷ ‘Zeitgeschichte, Zeitgemäß Erzählt’: <http://www.zdf.de/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter/zeitgeschichte-zeitgemaess-erzaehlt-26275822.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

influenced in part by his parents' experiences.⁸ Critics have nonetheless interrogated the apologetic implications of this title. Wolfgang Michal points out that even the parents of the oldest viewers, such as Hofmann, were barely adults when the war began: 'Sie waren nicht schuld an diesem Krieg, sondern in ihn verwickelt.'⁹ Does the repeated use of the possessive (*our* mothers, *our* fathers) not therefore represent a sly attempt to co-opt the audience from the outset, to defuse its critique of the wartime generation? After all, children are often reluctant to confront their parents with painful memories or accusations, especially when these tarnish idealized parental images. For Michal, the efforts made in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* to paint the protagonists sympathetically, in spite of their moral failings, betray the protective instincts of the producers who appear all too reluctant to interrogate their parents' involvement in the Third Reich.

The strange blurring of generations implied by the title recalls Sigrid Weigel's reflections on the transformation of generational discourse in post-1945 German culture. Weigel is sceptical about the generational rhetoric used by leading cultural figures such as Alfred Andersch (1914-1980) and Hans Werner Richter (1908-1993), who defined themselves as representatives of 'die neue Generation', vanguards of Germany's democratic

⁸ 'Filmproduzent Nico Hofmann im Gespräch: Es ist nie vorbei', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 March 2013: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter/filmproduzent-nico-hofmann-im-gespraech-es-ist-nie-vorbei-12118295.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁹ Wolfgang Michal, "'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter': Wunschtraumata der Kinder', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 March 2013: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter-wunschtraumata-der-kinder-12123324.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

rebirth, thus establishing their distance from older generations that allegedly carried the burden of responsibility for National Socialism.¹⁰ Such an understanding of generation as the mark of a unique historical perspective departs from an earlier emphasis on genealogy, that is, lineage and inheritance. For Weigel, as a sign of ‘distorted similarity’, generation in the post-1945 context paradoxically suggests continuity and rupture, an ambivalence arising from the historical and moral caesura of the Holocaust.¹¹ Weigel evokes a ‘ramming together [‘Verschachtelung’] of the order of generations’ to describe the way that the past experience of the war generation continues to live on in the psyche of subsequent generations.¹²

The idea that certain historical experiences can break down generational boundaries resonates with what Marianne Hirsch terms postmemory, the deep emotional connection between individuals and a traumatic past that they did not personally experience but that nonetheless dominates their own biographies. Hirsch implies that postmemory is not merely a traumatic quality of remembrance, however, but a generationally circumscribed form of historical engagement that has active dimensions. The work of postmemory requires ‘imaginative investment and creation’ in order to restore forgotten or repressed histories and clarify their relationship to the present.¹³ Postmemory ‘reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture’.¹⁴

¹⁰ Sigrid Weigel, “‘Generation’ as a Symbolic Form: On the Genealogical Discourse of Memory since 1945”, *Germanic Review*, 77 (2002), 264-77 (p. 272).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 269.

¹² Ibid., p. 271.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 5.

Initially, Hirsch suggested that postmemory 'is defined through an identification with the victim or witness of trauma'.¹⁵ Accordingly, her research focuses on the victims of Nazi persecution and their descendants. However, the term 'postmemory' can usefully be applied to the wider memory community, although not without due attention to the specific context in which it is applied.¹⁶ The proliferation of novels, films, and television programmes about the Nazi past since the turn of the century suggests that this period of German history continues to resonate emotionally with those born long after its end. Renewed focus on the experience of victimhood, which sociologist Harald Welzer describes as the emotional core of contemporary family memory,¹⁷ also explains a further shift in the memory landscape of twenty-first-century Germany: the increased 'feminization of Germany's story-telling'.¹⁸ The gender sequencing of the title *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* unusually emphasizes female historical actors. Their participation in the Third Reich is given equal billing in the drama itself too, a novelty in German memory culture. Two of the five focal protagonists are women and both collaborate with the NSDAP (at least initially). For example, would-be starlet Greta

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14 (2001), 5-37 (p. 10).

¹⁶ See also Long, 'Monika Maron's Pawels Briefe', pp. 148-51 in particular.

¹⁷ Harald Welzer, 'Schön Unscharf: Über die Konjunktur der Familien- und Generationenromane', *Mittelweg* 36, 23 (2004), 53-64.

¹⁸ Wilfried Wilms, 'Dresden: The Return of History as Soap', in *The Collapse of the Conventional: German Film and its Politics at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Jaimey Fisher and Brad Prager (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), pp. 136-56 (p. 136). See also Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 198.

happily profits from her connections with the Party. Her affair with a Gestapo officer appears to be motivated as much by her ambition as by her desire to procure exit papers for her Jewish boyfriend, Viktor. Similarly, Charlotte follows behind the German army as a nurse in a frontline hospital, proud to serve the nation. Her hostility toward the Russian local population also betrays her indoctrination by Nazi racial ideology. Such tainted female protagonists remain a rarity in cultural engagements with the Third Reich, even though historians since the 1980s have detailed the many ways in which German women supported the Nazi regime and its politics of discrimination.¹⁹

In parts two and three of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, both the female protagonists more closely resemble the conventional female figures that populate cultural memory as victims and recusants. Greta is arrested and later executed for defeatism, although it is suggested that her Nazi lover arranges her incarceration because she has threatened to tell his wife about their affair. The private intrigue blurs the political nature of Greta's actions in a manner symptomatic of popular discourse on women and National Socialism. In the latter stages of the mini-series, Charlotte too defies the regime. She finds ways to help soldiers desperate not to return to the front, for example. She also ignores rules about fraternization, striking up a friendship with a foreign auxiliary nurse, Sonja. Charlotte refuses to leave Sonja behind when the Germans abandon the hospital, a decision that leads to her rape and capture by Soviet soldiers. Drawn with similar contours, women abound as 'avatars of innocent feeling' in twenty-first century film explorations of the Nazi past, including *Rosenstrasse* (dir. Margarethe von Trotta, 2003), *Der Untergang* (dir. Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2004), *Sophie*

¹⁹ See Jill Stephenson's pioneering study, *The Nazi Organization of Women* (London: Croom Helm, 1981) and Kathrin Kompisch, *Täterinnen: Frauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2008).

Scholl – Die letzten Tage (dir. Marc Rothemund, 2005) and television productions such as *Dresden* (dir. Roland Suso Richter, 2006) and *Die Flucht* (dir. Kai Wessel, 2007).²⁰ If, as Murray Smith reminds us, the moral rectitude of a character is crucial for the spectator's alignment with on-screen figures,²¹ then the attractive, affable, and apparently virtuous women who lead us through the action of many recent historical melodramas enable us to witness retrospectively the terror of history 'from a safe position of innocence'.²²

Such films tell us little about the lives of redemptive female protagonists prior to their acts of heroism or experiences of victimhood, however. This narrative sleight of hand enables victimhood to be conflated with innocence, both of which are treated as immutable identity categories rather than as evaluations of a given experience or action. Such a treatment of the concepts victimhood and innocence in turn shores up essentialist notions of morality, which were radically thrown into question by the Holocaust. This trope, which pervades post-war memory culture, is particularly obvious in recent historical films, in which female protagonists fulfil a redemptive function. They make it possible to imagine that the moral

²⁰ Johannes von Moltke, 'The Politics of Feeling: Alexander Kluge on War, Film, and Emotion', in *Screening War: Perspectives on German Suffering*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Marc Silberman (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), pp. 230-50 (p. 236).

²¹ Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 188.

²² Elisabeth Krimmer, 'More War Stories: *Stalingrad* and *Downfall*', in *The Collapse of the Conventional*, ed. by Fisher and Prager, pp. 81-108 (p. 97). See also Anna Parkinson, 'Neo-feminist Mütterfilm? The Emotional Politics of Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosenstrasse*', *ibid.*, pp. 109-35.

ruination of the nation was not total and that moral rehabilitation was therefore possible.²³ At first glance, then, it would be hard to refute Johannes von Moltke's suspicion that feminine 'avatars of innocent feeling' contribute 'a significant affective dimension to the revisionist impulses many commentators have discerned in post-Wall German culture'.²⁴ The focus on women in recent films about the Nazi past creates a space for remembering the horrors of war without also needing to reflect on the individual's responsibility for the political events that precipitated it.

The prognosis for German memory culture appears to worsen if we accept Hirsch's belief that feminine (and particularly maternal) tropes are some of the most powerful vehicles of postmemory. They create an emotional connection between the present and a difficult past.²⁵ According to Hirsch, 'the idiom of family can become an accessible *lingua franca* easing identification and projection, recognition and misrecognition, across distance and difference'.²⁶ Family narratives speak to us on an emotional level, allowing us to recognize ourselves and our relationships in pasts that are otherwise foreign to us. For Hirsch, this involves a two-way process of 'suturing' whereby the individual projects herself into the narrative and in turn assimilates it into her own history, a thorny procedure that bears the danger of unethically appropriating the other's experiences.²⁷

²³ Compare this with the trope of the 'Good German', as explored in *Representing the Good German in Literature and Culture After 1945: Altruism and Moral Ambiguity*, ed. by Pól Ó Dochartaigh and Christiane Schönfeld (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013).

²⁴ Von Moltke, 'The Politics of Feeling', p. 236.

²⁵ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 48.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

The particular emphasis that Hirsch places on the maternal appears to derive from her engagement with Roland Barthes' *La chambre claire* (1980), which grounds her claims about the special relationship between photography and postmemory. For Barthes, the essence or *noeme* of photography derives not merely from its indexical relationship to the past but from its power to convey viscerally that past on a subjective level. Hirsch is inspired by his meditation that 'une sorte de lien ombilical relie le corps de la chose photographiée à mon regard: la lumière, quoique impalpable, est bien ici un milieu charnel, une peau que je partage avec celui ou celle qui a été photographié'.²⁸ The interplay of light and the look creates the photographed body, while the photograph itself, like postmemory, gives birth to fantasies arising from the cultural circulation of symbols and representations. The image of the umbilical cord is recycled in Hirsch's work as a metaphor for the strong familial tropes that consolidate postmemory. This metaphor also evocatively connects photography 'to life-giving, to maternity'.²⁹

In like fashion, postmemory brings the past back to emotional life by reigniting preconscious desires. Hirsch suggests that postmemory, mediated through symbolic and emotionally potent images, takes shape in the 'space between thought and the deepest emotional impulses'.³⁰ We can infer the nature of these impulses from her statement that the image of the idealized lost mother is particularly pervasive in postmemorial engagements with the Holocaust.³¹ The work of postmemory thus appears to be characterized by a profound longing to recuperate a sense of loss, defined as epistemological and ontological.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 1980), pp. 126–27.

²⁹ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 1.

Indeed, in *La chambre claire* Barthes discusses the fantasmatic appeal of certain photographed landscapes that unleash ‘[une] sorte de voyance qui semble me porter en avant, vers un tempts utopique, ou me reporter en arrière, je ne sais où de moi-même’.³² Hirsch interprets this site of wholeness and security as the pre-Oedipal maternal environment.

There is, then, something nostalgic and potentially escapist about postmemory. Hirsch acknowledges that the dominant tropes of postmemory ‘may be screen memories’ in a double sense.³³ On the one hand, the ideas and desires of the present may obscure the past. On the other, and in the Freudian sense of the concept, since postmemory describes an engagement with the past on the part of those who are heavily invested in it (because it shapes their sense of self), then it is not unsurprising that certain subjective needs mask aspects of the past that would be psychologically disruptive. Hirsch warns that the gendered and familial tropes that facilitate postmemory thus ‘function analogously to the protective shield of trauma: they function as screens that absorb the shock, filter and defuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm’.³⁴ If this quality of postmemory accounts for its affective force, then it also explains the necessity of active, ethical engagements with postmemory that work to disrupt uncritical forms of identification and projection and the historical distortions they engender.³⁵ The dangers that Hirsch perceives in this quality of postmemory are particularly pronounced when we consider what might be classed as perpetrator postmemory, the difficult, emotional, and morally loaded relationship between Germans born after the war and the Nazi past.

³² Barthes, *La chambre claire*, p. 68.

³³ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

To judge by critiques of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, the perils of postmemory are no longer merely academic. It would be beyond the scope of this article to rehearse the varied objections raised about the drama by critics, in Germany itself but also in the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Poland, where critique was particularly fierce. Given Laurel Cohen-Pfister's comprehensive engagement with the film in its reception context, a brief overview of the points of contention most relevant to the concerns of this article will suffice here.³⁶ Like many historical films, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* was subject to varied charges of historical imprecision, ranging from comments about the inaccuracy of the set design to the more serious failure to convey the widespread enthusiasm for Hitler and his nationalist politics in 1941, the year in which the mini-series commences.³⁷ Indeed, Hitler is never seen in the film, and his voice is only heard once, over the loudspeaker, as the Germans rush to evacuate the frontline hospital before the Red Army arrives. His voice is only heard, therefore, when nobody is listening any more. The concentration camps are another grave omission, seen only in reconnaissance photos taken by the Polish Home Army and implied by

³⁶ Laurel Cohen-Pfister, 'Claiming the Second World War and its lost Generation: *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* and the Politics of Emotion', *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies*, 50 (2014), 104-23.

³⁷ Christina Brüning, 'Das sagen Experten über "Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter"', *Berliner Morgenpost*, 20 March 2013: <http://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/article114596382/Das-sagen-Experten-ueber-Unsere-Muetter-unsere-Vaeter.html> [accessed 22 June 2015]; Ulrich Herbert, "'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter': Nazis sind immer die anderen', *die tageszeitung*, 21 March 2013: <http://www.taz.de/!113239/> [accessed 22 June 2015].

the cattle wagons, loaded with Jewish captives, which they hold up in the search for weapons. This scene, in which the Polish resistance fighters elect not to free the Jewish prisoners ('Jews are as bad as communists and Russians') is the most horrifying example of anti-Semitism in the film.³⁸ While the Polish protagonists openly express anti-Semitic beliefs, the German characters, with the exception of Charlotte's colleague Hildegard, do not. Charlotte denounces a Jewish auxiliary nurse without any apparent anti-Semitic feeling. Indeed, her actions appear more driven by the theft of morphine from the hospital, which obstructs her duty of care to German soldiers.

The behaviour of the protagonists betrays little of their socialization in the Third Reich. As in other war films, the focus on the frontline, although revealing the involvement of *Wehrmacht* soldiers in war crimes, obscures the home front and the complicity of the wider population. The standard iconography of the regime (one thinks of German towns draped in swastika flags) is also heavily muted. National Socialism is reduced to a handful of horrendous individuals, signalled by a cinematic code identifying Nazis by their 'Aryan' physicality as well as their brutality. As Ulrich Herbert muses, 'die Nazis, das sind in diesem Film nicht unsere Mütter und Väter, sondern die anderen'. German society, it seems, still lacks an appropriate idiom for describing how an otherwise quite rational and decent individual could support National Socialism and, ultimately, the eradication of the Jewish people. I agree with Herbert that such an idiom is the prerequisite for truly understanding the past.

Writing for *Der Spiegel*, Sebastian Hammelehle goes further than Herbert, emphasizing the revisionist elements of the film's narrative, 'in dem es zwar ein paar platte

³⁸ Unless otherwise stated, quotations in English are the subtitles provided on the UK Netflix edition of the drama, *Generation War*.

Nazibösewichte, sonst aber lauter nette, normale Deutsche gibt, in der [sic] Antisemitismus vor allem ein Problem der Polen ist und Brutalität ein Wesenszug der Roten Armee’.³⁹ Little wonder, then, that Polish and Russian critics and politicians took offence, with the Polish right-wing opposition party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) demanding the resignation of Juliusz Braun, the head of the public broadcaster TVP for allowing the drama to be shown in Poland. In turn, Braun wrote to ZDF in protest at the depiction of the Home Army.⁴⁰ The conservative-liberal news weekly, *Uważam Rze*, further accused Germany of historical falsification, of retrospectively portraying itself as victim of the Second World War, a message powerfully conveyed by a cover image depicting German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the striped uniform worn by concentration camp prisoners.⁴¹ In Germany too, the film has been accused of conjuring forth ‘eine uralte Opfer-Täter Verkehrung’, whereby all victims also appear in some way as perpetrators and all perpetrators are also victims.⁴²

³⁹ Sebastian Hammelehle, ‘TV-Debatte bei Jauch: Wischiwaschi durch den Weltkrieg’, *Spiegel Online*, 25 March 2013: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/tv/mutter-vater-was-habt-ihr-getan-tv-kritik-zu-weltkriegs-talk-bei-jauch-a-890691.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁴⁰ “‘Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter’ im polnischen Fernsehen gezeigt’, *Spiegel Online*, 18 June 2013: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter-im-polnischen-fernsehen-gezeigt-a-906434.html> [accessed 22 June 2015]. See also Gabriele Lesser, “‘Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter’ in Polen: Die haben Hochkultur, wir nur Eintopf”, *Die Tageszeitung*, 24 June 2013: <http://www.taz.de/!118603/> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁴¹ Leszek Pietrzak, ‘Fałszowanie historii’, *Uważam Rze*, 4 July 2013: <http://www.uwazamrze.pl/artykul/997230/fałszowanie-historii> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁴² Georg Diez, ‘Hefte raus zum Opfer-Täter-Diktat!’, *Spiegel Online*, 22 March 2013: <http://www.spiegel.de/artikel/a-890432.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

Georg Diez diagnoses *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, and a more recent ZDF drama based on the Nuremberg trials *Das Zeugenhaus* (2014), as examples of ‘das deutsche Entschuldungsfernsehen’.⁴³ He suggests that according to the film’s superficial logic, most Germans were not committed National Socialists, nor were they inherently racist or murderous. Instead, the film implies that their innate nobility was perverted by an inflated sense of national duty and by the demands of an atrocious war. That is to say, the prediction made by Friedhelm at the start of the film (‘der Krieg wird das Schlechteste in uns hervorholen’) was bound to come true. This aphorism ultimately suggests, however, that the Germans were victims of war, not simply because of the loss they had to endure but also because of the crimes it forced them to commit. Writing in this vein, Tobias Kaufmann sardonically inverts Friedhelm’s prognosis to read ‘der böse Krieg war’s’.⁴⁴

Concerns about the revisionist implications of an undue emphasis on the Germans as victims seem particularly valid in light of television panel discussions that lauded the film for conveying so well ‘das deutsche Trauma’, while glossing over its engagement with German guilt.⁴⁵ There is also something unsettling about producer Nico Hofmann’s assertion that ‘*Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* bespricht ein nationales Trauma, das geprägt ist von

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Tobias Kaufmann, “‘Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter’: Wir armen Täter’, *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 20 March 2013: <http://www.ksta.de/debatte/-unsere-muetter--unsere-vaeter--wir-armen-taeter,15188012,22161464.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁴⁵ See Hammelehle, ‘TV-Debatte bei Jauch’; Diez, ‘Hefte raus zum Opfer-Täter-Diktat!’; Floris Biskamp, ‘Deutsche Geschichte bei Lanz: Zu wenig Kolonien, zu viele Juden’, *Publikative.org*: <http://www.publikative.org/2013/03/26/deutsche-geschichte-bei-markus-lanz-zu-wenig-kolonien-zu-viele-juden/> [accessed 22 June 2015].

körperlichem und seelischem Schmerz, der Wahl zwischen Töten und Getötetwerden und der Unfähigkeit zu trauern'.⁴⁶ Admittedly, this synopsis hints at the notion of perpetrator trauma but in a manner capacious enough to serve evasive, revisionary ends. It redefines the perpetrator generation by virtue of the 'trauma' that it subsequently suffered. Indeed, in response to the drama, the tabloid *Bild* published an article on posttraumatic stress disorder in which guilt and notions of responsibility are discussed only as obstacles to working-through the trauma of the war and not as potential causes.⁴⁷ This understanding of trauma as an effect of war can be appropriated by subsequent generations much more easily than the legacy of perpetration or complicity. Indeed, in his review, Michal argues that the drama stages 'die Wunschtraumata' of the *post*-generation; 'es sind eingebildete Flashbacks, mit denen die sekundär Traumatisierten den Eltern Schuld und Scham abnehmen wollen und Gerechtigkeit für sie einfordern'.⁴⁸

Laurel Cohen-Pfister argues that placing a heavier emphasis on the prejudice and apathy of the pseudo parental figures would have distorted drama's primary objective of

⁴⁶ Alexander Kühn and Markus Brauck, 'Töten oder getötet werden', *Der Spiegel*, 3 November 2013: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-91464918.html> [accessed 22 June 2015]. The idea of a German 'trauma' was obviously appealing, with *Spiegel* including a feature on 'Das ewige Trauma: Der Krieg und die Deutschen' in the thirteenth issue of 2013 (25 March 2013), published the week after *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* first aired.

⁴⁷ Antje Raupach, 'TV-Epos "Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter": Soll ich mit meinen Eltern über den Krieg sprechen?', *Bild*, 19 March 2013: <http://www.bild.de/ratgeber/2013/psychologie/psychologie-kriegs-trauma-soll-ich-mit-meinen-eltern-ueber-den-krieg-sprechen-29559504.bild.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁴⁸ Michal, "'Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter'".

allowing belated generations to relate to the Nazi past, to ‘reclaim’ it as part of their own.⁴⁹

Writing in a similar vein, Michal identifies the death of the less heroic figures, Greta and Friedhelm, as the redemptive subtext of the drama: ‘Solche Eltern hätte man nicht gewollt.’⁵⁰ For Cohen-Pfister, moreover, because the drama so blatantly blurs the lines between fact and fiction, including birth and death dates for the fictional figures at the close of the film, for instance, it sheds light on the tension between historical consciousness (of guilt) and emotional engagement (with suffering) that continues to define German memory culture.⁵¹

The compatibility of emotion, ethical awareness, and historical knowledge has been a point of contention in critiques of the historical film ever since scholars began engaging with the genre. As Robert Rosenstone paradigmatically argued, ‘in favouring the visual and emotional data while simultaneously playing down the analytical, the motion picture is subtly – and in ways we do not yet know how to measure or describe – altering our very sense of the past’.⁵² Critics of television as a medium have maintained that the placement of ‘the box’ in the domestic environment means that its representations become part of, if not a form of background noise in, our everyday lives. At first glance, then, the immediacy and familiarity of the television medium does not appear conducive to active engagement. Adapting the terms of Jean Louis Baudry’s classic psychoanalytical account of the mechanisms of filmic identification, the immersion of television in the home can be understood to eliminate the

⁴⁹ Cohen-Pfister, ‘Claiming the Second World War and its Lost Generation’, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Michal, “‘Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter’”.

⁵¹ Cohen-Pfister, ‘Claiming the Second World War and Its Lost Generation’, p. 118.

⁵² Robert A. Rosenstone, ‘History in Images/History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History onto Film’, *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1173-85 (p. 1179).

distance between the viewing subject and televised representations, facilitating a regression to a narcissistic state of wholeness consolidated by the spectator's identification, from the perspective of the camera, with the idealized characters on screen. Baudry understands this relationship with the camera as a filmic reconfiguration of the mirror phase of child development. Under this reading, the cinematic apparatus fulfils a deep-seated, psychological longing for wholeness.⁵³

There are parallels between such conceptions of cinematic identification and Hirsch's understanding of the workings of postmemory, which facilitates psychological and emotional affiliation with a distant past via familial and maternal tropes. Critics' unease about *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* thus involve not merely what Hirsch dubs the 'perils of postmemory', nor the inadequacies of the televisual medium as a vehicle of cultural memory, but indeed how they relate to each other.⁵⁴ We will only be able to evaluate the achievements and shortcomings of historical melodramas like *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* when we understand the distinctive character of their engagement with the past, namely their adoption of the postmemorial position to recreate the past aesthetically and emotionally. As Lutz Koepnick argues, they function differently from earlier works primarily interested in "bearing witness" to the horrors of the Holocaust; in disturbing melancholic fixations on the past; in urging the viewer to recuperate the ability to mourn; or in refuting those who deny the facticity of Nazi

⁵³ Jean Louis Baudry, 'The Apparatus: Metaphysical Approaches to Ideology', in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. by Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 299-318.

⁵⁴ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 42.

genocidal politics'.⁵⁵ By contrast, postmemorial films devise strategies for reviving the past. According to Guido Knopp, former director of history programming for the *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF), the medium of television should be exploited to bring the past to life in a different form than might be possible in historical scholarship. Television has the potential to arouse curiosity, suspense, and participation by producing a sense of proximity: 'Wo Nähe ist, wird Vergangenheit lebendig, schlägt Beliebigkeit in Betroffenheit um. "Nähe", das zeigen die Erfahrungen, ist vor allem dann zu erwarten, wenn der Zuschauer sich wiedererkennt oder sich identifizieren darf.'⁵⁶ Such reflections attest the alignment between the objectives of contemporary television history and the fundamental characteristics of postmemory.

Their common principle of identification is not necessarily incompatible with ethical complexity. The nuances of postmemorial dramas such as *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* are unlikely to come to light, however, unless critics engage with them on their own terms, as aesthetic constructs that operate both on the level of the thematically explicit and the formally implicit. In other words, the emotional impulses of historical television fiction should not simply be dismissed as an impediment to historical understanding. The affective register is integral to the workings of the contemporary historical melodrama as an influential 'mode of

⁵⁵ Lutz Koepnick, 'Reframing the Past: Heritage Cinema and Holocaust in the 1990s', *New German Critique*, 87 (2002), 47-82 (p. 77).

⁵⁶ Guido Knopp, 'Geschichte Im Fernsehen: Perspektiven der Praxis', in *Geschichte im Fernsehen: Ein Handbuch*, ed. by Guido Knopp and Siegfried Quandt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 1-9 (p. 5).

historical thinking, one with its own rules of engagement with the past'.⁵⁷ This is the nub of Hayden White's term 'historiophoty' which conceives the historical film as a practice distinct from while still compatible with historiography.⁵⁸ A discussion of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* as a postmemorial film will not merely illuminate the nature of its popular intervention into contemporary memory culture, then; it will also enable us to reflect on and refine Hirsch's concept and reconsider its ethical limits.

Melodrama and the Postmemorial Film

Many objections about the representation of history in *Unsere Mütter, Unsere Väter* have related to the melodramatic mode that it chose to foster an affective connection between the viewing audience and the Nazi past. Similarly to the ground-breaking American mini-series *Holocaust* (1978), the German drama guarantees its broad appeal through a series of dramatic set pieces including the separation of lovers, incarceration, escape, and brushes with death, not to mention the return of characters after their apparent demise.⁵⁹ The events of the Second World War are filtered through typical romantic and familial plots, featuring Wilhelm and Charlotte as the drama's star-crossed lovers. Further dramatic tension comes in the form of the love-triangle between Greta, Viktor, and the Nazi major Dorn, and the fraternal conflict

⁵⁷ Robert A. Rosenstone, 'The History Film as a Mode of Historical Thought', in *A Companion to the Historical Film*, ed. by Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), pp. 71-87 (p. 86).

⁵⁸ Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), 1193-99 (p. 1193).

⁵⁹ Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat*, p. 30.

between dutiful lieutenant Wilhelm and his initially pacifist brother Friedhelm, who is a disappointment to his Prussian father. These protagonists are functional character types rather than individualized psychological constructs, a fact emphasized by their evocative names. Wilhelm, for example, derives from the Old High German nouns ‘Wille’ (will) and ‘Helm’ (helmet) or ‘Halm’ (upright), associating the character with military obedience and indeed with the German Emperors who also bore this name. Friedhelm is a contraction of Friedrich Wilhelm, the name of the ‘Soldier King’ of Prussia. Indicative of the fictional protagonist’s character, however, the prefix ‘Fried-’ also connotes peace.

Each protagonist illuminates specific moral issues, hence the radical and somewhat implausible reversals in their attitudes and behaviour. Friedhelm, for instance, becomes an obedient pawn in the Nazi killing machine while the enthusiastic soldier, Wilhelm, deserts in 1943, four years into the war. Their actions are more closely aligned with the necessities of storytelling than the standards of psychological or historical verisimilitude; they facilitate a rather contrived collision of characters, which maximizes the emotional and moral impact of the plot. The same can be said for what Thomas Elsaesser calls the ‘foreshortening of lived time in favour of intensity’,⁶⁰ the fact that *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* chooses to reduce the Third Reich to the final four devastating years, a decision probably influenced by commercial factors. Indeed, the decision to have Viktor escape from a concentration camp transport and join a pacifist group, where he witnesses Friedhelm’s participation in war crimes, was added to the script when the initial plan to have him emigrate to America proved too costly.⁶¹ The

⁶⁰ Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama’, in *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 350-79 (p. 376).

⁶¹ Kühn and Brauck, ‘Töten oder getötet werden’.

forced change to the script uncomfortably mirrors the fate of those Jews who lacked the financial means to emigrate in the 1930s.

As Elsaesser argues, however, these apparent contrivances are not of necessity signs of the creator's inability to mould realistic stories and characters; they are expressions of the world of melodrama and its organizing principles. In his classic study Peter Brooks conceives of melodrama 'as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience', which appears particularly compelling in times of upheaval and uncertainty, representing 'the principle mode for uncovering, demonstrating and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era'.⁶² The melodramatic defence of moral absolutes plays out in recent television reconstructions of the Third Reich in which the suffering, and often virtuous, maternal figures (such as Anna in *Dresden* and Lena in *Die Flucht*) are contrasted with committed, self-interested male Nazis. In these cases, binary gender constructs reinforce mutually exclusive notions of good and evil.

What is more, descriptions of war as a form of divine punishment in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* reflect the melodramatic tendency to displace questions of moral agency onto social or existential forces, to which the individual is apparently helplessly subjected, irrespective of his or her own moral convictions. The autonomy of the characters is even downplayed where they resist. When Wilhelm deserts, for example, he is in a daze after being caught up in an explosion. There is a trance-like quality to the scene that follows his flight from the battleground; the muted sound and blurred images reinforce our impression that his desertion is hardly a conscious decision. His actions appear disconnected from social reality; indeed, he holes himself up in the seclusion of a woodland cabin until he is

⁶² Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 15.

discovered. Yet more striking, the act of resistance for which Greta is arrested and executed is a petulant response to an over-friendly officer and hardly an intentional affront to the regime. These examples reinforce a view of the protagonists as lacking autonomy and as wholly out of sync with the world in which they live.

The title of Part One ('eine andere Zeit') conveys a similar sense that the characters stem from a social reality different from the one in which war immerses them. The photograph of the five friends, taken the night before Wilhelm and Friedhelm set off for the front, preserves their essential goodness on celluloid. Marianne Hirsch contends that photographs are particularly powerful stimuli of postmemory. They depict people 'just like us', striking up recognizable poses and adopting readable expressions. The familiarity of the photographic scenario makes it possible for us to project ourselves into the photograph and therefore to imagine ourselves in similar times and locales. In *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, we are also reminded of the fundamentally uncanny nature of the photographic portrait, which fixes the subject in a temporal vacuum, enabling fantasies that disavow his or her death and decay (physical and moral). The first words in Part One come in the form of a voiceover as Wilhelm reflects on the moment of death: 'Man sagt, dass alles um einen herum still wird im Moment des Todes.' The drama opens with a flash-forward to the resumption of battle after the winter ceasefire between the Germans and the Russians at the end of 1941. Unaware of the impending Russian charge, Friedhelm had been sent into the woods to fetch firewood. Later, we see him running toward the German trenches and caught in the crossfire between the two armies. In a voiceover, Wilhelm tells us, 'das ist Friedhelm, mein Bruder. Er wird uns keine große Hilfe mehr sein', apparently announcing his death. We then travel back six months, to the day when the Winter brothers prepared to leave for the front, bidding farewell to their parents before meeting Charlotte, Greta, and Viktor for a farewell party. As they take a group photograph, we hear Wilhelm's retrospective reflections: 'Wir waren fünf

Freunde. Wir waren jung und wir wussten, dass uns die Zukunft gehören würde. Die ganze Welt lag vor uns. Wir mussten nur zugreifen. Wir waren unsterblich. Wir sollten es bald besser wissen.’ The contrast between word and image here exemplifies Susan Sontag’s sense that ‘photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction and this link between photography and death haunts all photos of people’.⁶³

As the protagonists look at this photograph, they are cast back to a supposedly better time. In these moments, the viewer is encouraged to remember their goodness and innocence before they were corrupted by politics, violence, and death. But this is an idealization, as naïve as the idea that 1941 was a ‘different’ time, two years after the start of war, three years after *Kristallnacht*, eight years after Hitler’s rise to power. The photograph symbolizes the screens through which postmemory is frequently filtered. Such images become the vehicles of repressive fantasies, enabling the delusion that the safe, consolatory world they construct has not been lost, and that we may one day find our way back to it. In this regard, the photograph does not merely preserve the past in indexical fashion; it sets the stage for ‘an affective encounter that can bring back the most primal childhood fears and desires for care and recognition’.⁶⁴ The photograph condenses the postmemorial logic of the drama, fostering identification through melodramatic tropes. If the melodrama works to align the spectator with protagonists by virtue of their victimhood, meaning their suffering as well as their subjection to social or divine forces beyond their control, it also ‘famously stages a nostalgic return to a space of innocence, a site of almost pre-Oedipal plenitude, from which the protagonists were forcefully – and fatefully – expelled’.⁶⁵ According to Koepnick, this is the

⁶³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1989), p. 70.

⁶⁴ Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ Anna Parkinson, ‘Neo-feminist Muetterfilm?’, p. 121.

crux of the German historical film, which, as melodrama, reproduces the national past ‘as a curse of nostalgic pleasures and positive identifications’.⁶⁶

The chaste romance between handsome Wilhelm and pretty Charlotte is the primary vehicle for these pleasures and identifications. The romantic plot recycles generic tropes to elicit the viewer’s allegiance with the hero and heroine. The recaps shown at the start of each episode frame the action in terms of the romantic stories, signalling their narrative significance. The early placement of the ‘will-they? won’t-they?’ relationship is surely also a ploy to hook new viewers into the drama. Admittedly, the romantic template sits uncomfortably alongside the Nazi drama, the former conventionally devoid of the moral conflict that defines the latter. This tension is resolved with the help of an outsider, the Eastern European Jew, Lilja, a former doctor who now works with Charlotte as an auxiliary nurse in the frontline hospital. Two-thirds into part one, the brief reunion between Charlotte and Wilhelm, who have still not admitted their love to each other, is framed by shots of Lilja watching the couple with interest. Later, Lilja strikes up a conversation about Wilhelm, implicitly giving the spectator permission to root for the romance. As the discussion turns to Lilja’s husband, however, we are not allowed to forget that the obstacles in the way of Wilhelm and Charlotte’s relationship are nothing compared to those separating the Jewish couple. During this tête-a-tête, Charlotte almost tells Lilja that she has denounced her to the Gestapo and that she ought to flee before they come to arrest her. When she fails to do so, Charlotte becomes an agent of the estrangement between Lilja and her husband.

⁶⁶ Lutz Koepnick, ‘Amerika gibt’s überhaupt nicht: Notes on the German Heritage Film’, in *German Pop Culture: How ‘American’ is it?*, ed. by Agnes C. Mueller (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 191-208 (p. 192).

Greta's ballad ('Mein kleines Herz'), which is the aural link between the three parts, further suggests the extent to which the romantic dynamics of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* are used to plot the action. The lyrical address to the absent lover works to create connections between the figures even when they are isolated, and purports to give the spectator insight into their thoughts without the need for dialogue. In moments of solitude, then, the song suggests that the overriding consideration for these characters is their lost lover, no matter the situation they find themselves in. As Elsaesser remarks, the origins of the word melodrama, as the combination of music (Greek, *melos*) and drama (French, *drame*), are a helpful critical tool, since they remind us that the features of melodrama are 'constituents of a system of punctuation, giving expressive colour and chromatic contrast to storyline'.⁶⁷ That is to say, much as melodrama has become colloquial shorthand for stereotyped situations and excessive emotion, indeed an overall lack of artistic sophistication, as a creative mode, it is a layered aesthetic construct, with a potential depth disguised by the superficial elements of plot and character. In *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, the musical theme does not merely engineer the emotional response of the viewer; it also creates a sense of dramatic discord. For example, at the end of part one, when Greta records her ballad, she has just missed Viktor, who has departed in good faith to catch a train out of Germany, only to learn that his girlfriend's Nazi lover has tricked them and that he will be deported. If Viktor is in Greta's mind as she sings, her lover watches on.

As the scene switches to other characters, the music, which continues to play, strengthens the implications of back-to-back images of a remorseful Charlotte who huddles on a step, drinking and looking ruefully at the group photograph, and Wilhelm, who stares pensively into space. Their thoughts are with the other, the ballad suggests. However, the

⁶⁷ Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 374.

romantic sentiment of its lyrics clashes with the next shots of Friedhelm holding his rifle and Viktor in an interrogation room. Such uneasy parallels are amongst the mechanisms through which melodrama works to ‘open up also new associations but also redistribute the emotional energies’.⁶⁸ The simple romantic plot is also disrupted, for instance, in part three when Wilhelm and Charlotte are reunited, after his rumoured death. Wilhelm’s joy contrasts with the despair of Charlotte, who cannot believe her eyes and who has moved on. Rather than ending with the anticipated confession of love, this scene concludes as Charlotte pushes Wilhelm away before fleeing, distraught at this twist of fate. When she composes herself and turns back to find Wilhelm, he has already departed, bringing the rollercoaster of emotion and suspense back down to a nadir. Even after the war ends, and Charlotte and Wilhelm find each other – and Viktor – there is no fairy tale happy-ending. The romantic plot is neither addressed nor resolved. To invert Koepnick’s summary of recent German historical melodrama, bad history is not converted into a good story.⁶⁹

Those who survive have also suffered various degrees of loss and have been forced to reassess their relationships and convictions. It is hard to believe that the friendship between Viktor, Charlotte, and Wilhelm can ever revert to what it was before. What is more, Greta dies, having betrayed Viktor and failed to take care of his family, while Friedhelm perishes after having compromised all of his ideals for the sake of survival. Critics such as Herbert are right to be suspicious of the tragic overtones of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* – the suggestion, namely, that the protagonists were simply victims of a dictatorship and war with horrific consequences. I would suggest, however, that the drama also contains an element of the tragic in the classical sense, in that the downfall of each figure results from a fatal character flaw.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 385.

⁶⁹ Koepnick, ‘Reframing the Past’, p. 72.

Wilhelm's breakdown is unthinkable without his previous idealism about war, which is only ever barbaric. Greta's manipulative ways cause Dorn to tire of her; her solipsism and blindness precipitate her arrest. While Wilhelm and Charlotte are saved (a cynic might say redeemed), this is only possible in the melodramatic universe because they have achieved some sort of tragic self-awareness. This is not therefore a form of redemption that absolves them of their crimes.

In this, therefore, I take issue with Laurel Cohen-Pfister, who has a dismal view of the drama's capacity to encourage critical reflection. The actions and choices of the protagonists are portrayed 'outside moral categories', she argues. They are 'presented as evolving from the situation, without today's hindsight or moral commentary'.⁷⁰ Cohen-Pfister senses that moral reflection is definitively thwarted because the film sets up the friends, and Charlotte and Wilhelm, in particular, as figures of identification. For Cohen-Pfister, this means that viewers are encouraged 'to feel for and with them, and to agree with their view on historical events. [...] More explicitly, it asks viewers to empathize with the parents or grandparents whose lives it aims to depict'.⁷¹ In the final part of this article, then, I will reflect on the ways in which *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* engineers our sympathy with the figures in order to suggest, against Cohen-Pfister, that the novelty of the drama lies precisely in its reconfiguration of standard modes of identification.

Rethinking Sympathy and Empathy in Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter

⁷⁰ Cohen-Pfister, 'Claiming the Second World War and its Lost Generation', p. 108.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 106.

Cohen-Pfister assumes that the viewer will accept the choices that the protagonists make because they are his or her guides through the Second World War. She adopts a deterministic view of identification as somewhat passive, static, and monolithic, and discounts the viewer's autonomy, assuming that he or she will merge with the positions forced on him or her by the drama.⁷² Her article also neglects the complex narrative and technological means through which film sets up and manipulates structures of identification. In order to account for such complexities, Murray Smith has deconstructed the notion 'identification', which in his view condenses at least three interacting but distinct levels of engagement with fictional characters. First, recognition concerns the way that the film narrative uses stereotypes and tropes to convey knowledge about the protagonists, for example the aforementioned cinematic code linking blondness and Nazi fanaticism. Second, alignment is similar to the notion of point of view. When we are aligned with a character, we are privy to their actions, thoughts, and feelings. There is a pattern of multiple, and potentially conflicting, alignment in *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*. We follow each of the five main characters as they go their separate ways, seeing the events of the Second World War through their eyes, meaning at once from the perspective of the loyal soldier and the persecuted Jew. This mode of representation ensures that the victim perspective is not erased from the narrative of the perpetrators.⁷³ Various devices also provide insight into their mind-sets. The voiceovers offer information about Wilhelm's state of mind, for instance. Reaction shots enable us to read the figures' faces and gestures for clues as to their feelings. In part one, when Friedhelm suggests sending a group of locals across a minefield in Russia to clear the way for their unit, a silent exchange of looks between him and Wilhelm conveys their sense of horror as well as their realization that

⁷² Smith, *Engaging Characters*, p. 6.

⁷³ See Schmitz, *On Our Own Terms*, p. 99

this is what the war – and their participation in it – has come to. Smith's third contention is that allegiance with a figure has to do with how the film shapes the viewer's sympathies towards a given character, for example through the romantic plot which encourages the spectator to root for Wilhelm and Charlotte. Taken together, alignment, allegiance and recognition form what Smith calls 'the structure of sympathy'.⁷⁴

Smith convincingly demonstrates, moreover, that none of these processes 'entails that the spectator replicate the traits, or experience the thoughts or emotions of a character'.⁷⁵ Nor are they purely affective rather than cognitive. As Smith argues, allegiance with a protagonist elicits 'acentral' responses in the viewer: 'I understand the protagonist and her context, make a more or less sympathetic or antipathetic judgment of the character, and respond emotionally in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action.'⁷⁶ The fact that *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* solicits our allegiance for characters who make immoral choices does not mean that we necessarily accept their actions as inevitable, as Cohen-Pfister suggests. Such deterministic conclusions forget that the emotional work of the television drama does not take place in isolation; nowadays the dialogue that it can provoke spreads out of the home, into the media, and onto the Internet. Even if a programme fails to encourage moral reflection in the viewer, other channels that link into 'event television' certainly do.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, p. 102.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

⁷⁷ Knopp coined the term 'Ereignisfernsehen' to describe the potential of the docudrama to make past stories 'recognizable' for the viewing audience by combining fiction with documentary footage. See Iris Alanyaly and Joachim Huber, 'Die Zeitgeschichte – eine Doku-Soap? Guido Knopp über Hitler, Helfer und Krieger im Film und über die Shoah-

Many viewers will have been at least aware of the media debate provoked by the drama, with even the tabloid *Bild* featuring articles on the historical veracity of what was depicted. For younger viewers, the broadcaster also produced a series of teaching materials, reinforcing the pedagogical aims of the production.

In a drama such as *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, our evaluations are further affected by external information and by the different contexts in which we live and the film unfolds. The allegiance that we may feel for the figures is complicated at several key moments of the drama, not least when Wilhelm or Charlotte voice nationalist convictions. The very first scene after the opening titles depicts the parents of Wilhelm and Friedhelm bidding their sons farewell as they prepare to head to the front. Wilhelm is aligned with his authoritarian and nationalist father, which immediately renders him a problematic figure from a contemporary perspective. Similarly, when we first meet Charlotte, she enthusiastically tells Greta about her nursing exam and proudly states that she answered ‘nothing’ to a trick question about what will come after the Third Reich. It is equally jarring when she arrives at the field hospital and tells the matron that she is there, ‘Dienst am deutschen Mann und damit am Vaterland zu leisten’. In a roundtable discussion printed in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, two students confirm their inner resistance to this language, deemed ‘unglaublich pathetisch’, which expresses a version of patriotism foreign to contemporary audiences.⁷⁸ The apparent naivety of this patriotic sentiment is also unsettling given our historical knowledge about the atrocities committed in its name.

Foundation: Gespräch mit Iris Alanyaly und Joachim Huber’, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 24 November 1998, p. 31.

⁷⁸ ‘Filmproduzent Nico Hofmann im Gespräch: Es ist nie vorbei’.

These elements reinforce the difficulties of narrating from the perpetrator perspective without alienating the contemporary viewer. Dominick LaCapra has warned against certain forms of ‘seeking empathy with perpetrators’ that may create ‘an objectionable (or at best deeply equivocal) kind of discomfort or unease in the reader or viewer by furthering fascination and a confused sense of identification with or involvement in certain figures and their beliefs or actions in a manner that may well subvert judgment and critical response’.⁷⁹ However, only when we approach the Nazi past from a position of similarity rather than alienation or distance will we be able to relate the moral challenges that it poses to our own experience. The director Philipp Kadelbach admits that this challenge drew him to the project: ‘Die Zeit aus der Introspektive der Figuren zu verstehen, das hat mich interessiert. Aus dieser Perspektive ist eine Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs so – glaube ich – noch nicht erzählt worden.’⁸⁰ During the *FAZ* roundtable discussion referred to above, Frank Schirrmacher questions one of the participants when she admits to identifying strongly with the protagonists. Charlotte is hardly a typical heroine, he remarks referring to her decision to report her Jewish colleague to the *Gestapo*. Yet, his interlocutor disputes his assumption that identification is passive and only ever positive: ‘Man fragt sich einfach: Wie hätte ich mich verhalten in dieser Situation?’⁸¹ *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* succeeds in challenging

⁷⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 202-03.

⁸⁰ ‘Philipp Kadelbach im Gespräch: Darf ich zu diesen Figuren Nähe aufbauen?’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 March 2013: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter/philipp-kadelbach-im-gespraech-darf-ich-zu-diesen-figuren-naehe-aufbauen-12114730.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

⁸¹ ‘Filmproduzent Nico Hofmann im Gespräch: Es ist nie vorbei’.

standard modes of identification by encouraging the spectator to sympathize with figures that are invested in nationalist values about which we are deeply suspicious nowadays.

Johannes Tuchel, director of the *German Resistance Memorial Centre* in Berlin, was one of few critics of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* to reflect on what it might mean that we are encouraged to like Charlotte, even though she is sympathetic to Nazi aims and consequently makes troubling moral choices. Tuchel acknowledges the danger that the viewer may therefore try to make excuses for her actions, or be willing to forgive them when she realizes the error of her ways and strikes up a friendship with a Russian nurse, putting herself at risk in order to try and help Sonja escape from the Red Army, who will execute Sonja for collaborating with the Germans. Yet is our horror not also magnified because Charlotte, Wilhelm, Greta, and Friedhelm seem so very much like us? Does this proximity not prompt a stronger emotional and moral response in the viewer and therefore potentially more profound critical reflection? Uniquely, Tuchel directly engages with *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* and its goals, namely to make the events of the past, and the perpetrators, more real: emotionally and morally.⁸²

In this respect, this drama sheds light on an under-theorized dimension of contemporary studies of postmemory: whether individuals experience the same deep affective connection to the history of the perpetrators as they do to the stories of the victims – and, if not, then what are the implications for future memory culture? If *Unsere Mütter*,

⁸² See also ‘Martin Schulz zu “Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter”’: Was die Geschichte dieses Films uns lehrt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 March 2013: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter/martin-schulz-zu-unsere-muetter-unsere-vaeter-was-die-geschichte-dieses-films-uns-lehrt-12120627-p2.html> [accessed 22 June 2015].

unsere Väter suggests that we may answer the above in the affirmative, then the debate it provoked also demonstrates the need to consider in more detail the ethical issues raised by this form of postmemory. Attempts to theorize emotional encounters between the *post*-generation and the Holocaust mostly reflect on the ethical possibilities of engaging with the past of a persecuted other. For Hirsch, postmemory facilitates a process of ‘heteropathic’ identification, citing Kaja Silverman’s use of the term in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (1996). This type of identification provides ‘a way of aligning the “not-me” with the “me” without interiorizing it’ but while nonetheless allowing the individual to understand on a deep emotional and cognitive level the hardships of the other.⁸³ The desire to bridge the gap between self and other, without unreflectively appropriating the latter’s experiences, is for Hirsch a driving force of the work of postmemory.

In her project, however, the other is primarily defined as the historical victim.⁸⁴ In an article from 2012, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, she leaves unanswered the question: ‘Is postmemory limited to victims, or does it include bystanders and perpetrators, or could one argue that it complicates the delineations of these positions which, in Holocaust studies, have come to be taken for granted?’⁸⁵ *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* suggests that historical distance has enabled a more differentiated approach to questions of victimhood and perpetration, even though the debates prompted by the drama remind us how thorny endeavours to complicate absolute conceptions of victims and perpetrators remain. A complex picture of the subjective experience of history, and its undeniably moral dimensions, will not emerge until monolithic

⁸³ Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, p. 85. See also Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁸⁴ Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, *Poetics Today*, 29 (2008), 103-28 (p. 107).

terms like victim and perpetrator are refined, however. This is not moral relativism but a moral challenge.

Similarly to Hirsch, Alison Landsberg argues that mass media engagements with the past construct 'transferential spaces in which people are invited to enter into experiential relationships with events through which they themselves did not live', consequently gaining visceral access to the past.⁸⁶ These forms of sensual engagement aid the adoption of what she calls 'prosthetic memories' that may shape how an individual understands the world precisely because they feel so real. In particular, Landsberg suggests, such prosthetic memories are instrumental for teaching the individual to engage 'both intellectually and emotionally with another who is radically different from oneself'.⁸⁷ Empathy is the central term of her theory, whereas she is sceptical about the ethical possibilities of sympathy, which assumes similarity and therefore carries with it the risk of appropriation.

The ethical engagement with the past that Landsberg and Hirsch imagine gains a second dimension, however, when we consider the history of the perpetrators. Dramas like *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* elicit our sympathy towards those who made the Third Reich and the Holocaust possible. They make us recognize our fundamental similarity to the perpetrators, reminding us that moral thought and action are not always clear-cut nor a matter of course, and that they must be actively pursued. In this manner, *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* represents a move away from what Gillian Rose calls a normalized 'representation of Fascism' that 'leaves the identity of the voyeur intact', in other words, one that does not

⁸⁶ Alison Landsberg, 'America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy', *New German Critique*, 71 (1997), 63-86 (p. 66).

⁸⁷ Alison Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 22 (2009), 221-29 (p. 222).

‘unman her’.⁸⁸ Such representations function by hypostatizing and abjecting Fascism, by preventing the viewer from truly grasping their implication in its mechanisms and therefore from learning the moral lessons of history. Such representations are hence also fascist in nature because they scapegoat the Fascist other in order to safeguard the innocence and integrity of the self. For Rose, true understanding, an effective ‘Holocaust ethnography’, is only possible when the ‘representation of Fascism’ also makes us aware of the ‘fascism of representation’,⁸⁹ thus forcing us to grieve ‘our ineluctable grounding in the norms of the emotional and political culture represented’.⁹⁰

Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter might not be a perfect example of the Holocaust ethnography that Rose desires. Analysing where it fails and where it succeeds can, however, shed light on the aesthetic challenges and ethical priorities of postmemorial culture. For all its historical flaws, the value of *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* lies in its attempts to engage us emotionally in the history of those who supported the Third Reich, at a time when the last generation of eye witnesses is dying out. The melodrama might not provide a conclusive or even satisfactory answer to the question of how an apparently civilized people could come to tolerate, promote, and perpetrate discrimination and mass murder. The debate prompted by *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter* nonetheless affirms how vexed and vital such questions remain. For if memory culture does not find ways to bring to life the experiences of the many ordinary Germans who were invested in Nazi ideology, victimhood will remain the only

⁸⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 54.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 41.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

position of identification open to subsequent generations as they attempt to forge emotional and moral links with the past.

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